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THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS.

At the opening of the Session held in the Town Hall, Calcutta on Friday, the 9th April, H. H. the Maharaja of Durbhanga, who occupied the chair, said:—

Gentlemen,

It is with feelings of very great pleasure that I find myself called upon to preside over this great and representative gathering —an assembly consisting of men belonging to all the principal religions of the world, met together in friendly conference, to exchange their views with each other, with the main purpose of finding out, not how far separate they are in creed or ritual but how near they are to each other, when they penetrate through all the outward forms and come face to face with the eternal verities which lie at the inner heart of hearts of all the great religions of the world.

2 Such conferences have been held from remote antiquity. The Brahmans, in the remote period of Indian History did not, it is true, allow other people to participate in their conferences, but a great change came upon Hindu society with the rise of Buddhism in the sixth century, B.C. The first religious conference in a

recognised form was held by the Buddhists at Rajgir (Behar) in 543 B.C. under the auspices of King Ajatasatru. The next conference was held by them at Vaisali (in Mozafferpur in 443 B. C.) Similarly a third conference was held by the Buddhists at Pataliputra (Patna) in 255 B C. under the auspices of Emperor Asoka. The fourth conference was held in Jalandhara (Punjab) under the auspices of King Kanishka about 78 A.D. As late as in the seventh century A. D. King Harshvardhana of Kanyakubja used to hold religious conferences at the interval of every five years. Similarly the Jains used to convene religious conferences, of which the most notable one was held at Mathura in the second century A.D. Kumarilabhatta and Sankaracharyya were perhaps the first batch of Brahmanic reformers that advocated religious conferences in proper forms. Though their aim was a religious conquest they convened conferences of the followers of all religions existing in their times and entered upon healthy discussion with them. Even during the reign of the Emperor Akbar, we hear of conferences, of the followers of different religions, and in more recent times religious conferences, better known as Parliaments of Religions, have been held in Chicago and Venice, and occasionally similar conferences are held in different parts of Europe. Even in Modern India our religious gatherings, periodically held in almost all parts of the Empire, call forth vast congregations, of which the greatest is the Kumbha Mela. These melas provide us with opportunities of exercising practical piety and spirituality through the advantages they afford of being filled with magnetism of the greatest saints of all sects and creeds and permeated through and through with the vibrations of the spiritual atmosphere by which the assemblies are generally pervaded.

3. Man has been classified as a religious animal. For go anywhere you like throughout the world, you will find, even amongst the tribes lowest down in the scale of civilization, some acknowledgment of a higher power than themselves, good or evil, of whom they stand in awe and worship after their various fashions of religious ritual.

4. We are met to-day as a Parliament of Religions. This reminds me of the meaning which lies at the root of the word "Religion." It signifies a "binding again"—a binding of man to his brother man, and they again to God. This is, I trust, the spirit which lie at the back of all our thoughts in the discussion about to take place, and if so, we will find ourselves at the close of this Session, companions-in-arms, although belonging to different

regiments of that great army, whose leader and commander is God, against all the opposing forces of evil which surround us in this world.

There are as many religions in the world as there are modes of worship of the Divine Being. Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Mahomedanism, etc., are all religions inasmuch as they prescribe divine worship in some forms or other. Sreekrishna says in The Bhagavadgita :

" I serve men in the way in which they approach Me. In every way, O son of Pritha, men follow in my path." (Bhagavadgita, Chapter IV, verse II).

A poet says in Persian :—

" A Mussulman is the slave of Thy face, a Brahman is a prisoner of Thy locks Thou art in the Kaaba and in the Mosque and Thou art also in the Fire-worshipper's Shrine and in the Temple of the Hindu."

5 The various religions of the world represent in their votaries the cry in diverse ways of human hearts hungering after their God, if haply they might find Him and become acquainted with His character But God is in them all, and is leading His children through all their religions, and by disciplinary education according as they are able to bear it into full light of His gracious Fatherhood towards all the children of men.

The time may not yet be near at hand, but the human race, through diverse ways, are all marching on towards one universal religion, *viz* :—" The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man."

We are met here to recognise this great truth and to help to bring it about

6. We may worship at different earthly shrines, and express our ecclesiastical creeds by differing formulas, and worship through the various modes of ritual and symbols by which our forefathers have worshipped God. But while we differ and sometimes differ largely in these outward forms of creed and ritual ; in the things of the heart and the spiritual life, we find ourselves in the haven of peace. In the outer courts of Ecclesiasticism there has always been war, but in the interior we find that Sainthood is one and the same all the world over.

7. Creeds and Rites and outward Ceremonials and Symbols doubtless expressed some spiritual meaning when they were first instituted and were meant to be helps to the inner life, but it is the almost invariable history of all these things that through the lapse of time these symbols largely become emptied of their original interior significance, and people keep on worshipping the husk when the kernel is gone. This is true in all religions. As I have already said we may dispute about the outward vestures of our faiths, but when we get into the inner *sanctum sanctorum*, we are all at one. There is no dispute about the great characteristics of the spiritual life, such as love, purity, truth, righteousness, goodness, gentleness, helpfulness, forgiveness, brotherly kindness, hope, joy, peace, and all those other qualities which blossom and bear fruit in the highest human character. In this realm we are all at one.

In taking a glance at some of the great religions represented in this Parliament, time will only permit me to touch on them in a somewhat cursory manner. Nor is more necessary, seeing there are friends here who will severally give expositions of the Faiths to which they individually belong.

ZOROASTRIANISM.

8. In Zoroastrianism we have an actual theological dualism. Two Spirits—once a God creating all that is good, and the other an evil being creating all evil. The pious Zoroastrian, after an honourable toil, goes to an immortality of blessedness in thought, word and deed. According to the later avesta if not pious he falls to Hell in passing over the Judge's Bridge, and this Hell consists of evil thoughts, words and deeds, as well as physical torment. His body rises and he dwells on a rejuvenated earth, through the instrumentality of a Saviour born of Virgin. No religion has so clearly grasped the ideas of guilt and of merit. On the works of men here below a strict reckoning will be held in Heaven according to the deeds entered in the book. Zoroastrianism knows nothing of the remission of sins, but an evil deed can be atoned for by a good one. The end of all things will be one undivided kingdom of God in Heaven and on earth.

BUDDHISM.

9. I now briefly glance at the religion of Buddhism in India. In answer to a question as to what he considered the *summum bonum*, Gautama is reported to have said :—

1. " To serve wise men, and not to serve fools, to give honour to whom honour is due,—this is the greatest blessing. 2. To dwell in a pleasant land, to have done good deeds in a former birth, to have right desires for one's self,—this is the greatest blessing. 3. Much insight and much education, a complete training and pleasant speech—this is the greatest blessing. 4. To succour father and mother, to cherish wife and child, to follow a peaceful calling—this is the greatest blessing. 5. To give alms. and live righteously, to help one's relatives, and do blameless deeds—this is the greatest blessing. 6. To cease and abstain from sin. to eschew strong drink, not to be weary in well doing,—this is the greatest blessing. 7. Reverence and lowliness, contentment and gratitude, the regular hearing of the law,—this is the greatest blessing. 8. To be long suffering and meek, to associate with members of the Sangha, religious talk at due seasons, this is the greatest blessing. 9. Temperance and chastity, a conviction of the four great truths, the hope of Nirvana, this is the greatest blessing. 10. A mind unshaken by the things of the world, without anguish or passion, and secure,—this is the greatest blessing. 11. They that act like this are invincible on every side they walk in safety, and theirs is the greatest blessing.'

Self-conquest and universal charity, these are the foundation thoughts, the web and woof of Buddhism, the melodies on the variations of which its enticing harmony is built up.

ISLAM.

10. The word Islam implies pious resignation and submission to the Divine Will. The Great Arabian Prophet enjoined upon all Mussalmans the observance of five duties : First, the belief that there is but One God ; Second, the observance of five daily prayers ; Third, the giving of Sadka or alms ; Fourth, the fasting for one month during the holy month of Ramazan ; Fifth. pilgrimage to Mecca once in a Mussalman's lifetime. A belief in a judgment to come is an essential part of the creed, teaching men that they ought to live their lives seriously and not to waste them in follies. Every Moslem is every other Moslem's brother. In social gradations the rich man is considered to be the natural protector of the poor. and the poor man takes his place at the table of the rich. No here in Mahomedan society is there any invidious distinction between rich and poor, and not less than one-fortieth of their goods is given to the benefit of the poor. The above is the pure and true essence of the great Mussalman religion.

CHRISTIANITY.

11. I would now briefly refer to Christianity. Jesus Christ lived in Palestine nearly 2,000 years ago. Here we tread on historical ground. Jesus Christ lived to the age of 33 years. He claimed to be the Son of God and the Son of Man. His great distinctive message to His own countrymen, and through them to the world, was that God was not only the Creater, the Upholder, and Ruler of all things, but that above all these, He was a Father seeking to bring His human family back to Himself in order that they might live the Blessed life in this world. and afterwards in the Eternal home above. Jesus Christ lived up to His own teaching. He wrote nothing, but imbued His own immediate followers with His wonderful sayings and with His own spirit. These men in turn lighted up the then known world with the words of their Master and so the religion of Christ spread until we behold the Christendom of to-day Jesus Christ, after a three years' public ministry, was put to death on the Roman Cross, but His followers believe that He rose again on the third day to die no more ; that His Spirit now pervades all things ; that the attractive power of His Cross was never felt so much as it is to-day, and that the law of His life of sacrificial love was maintained by simply doing the will of His Father and in placing implicit trust in Him. The great principles of the kingdom which he wished to set up on earth was the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Christianity holds out the forgiveness of sins and the sure hope of an eternal life after death.

HINDUISM.

12. The Hindu Religion, to which I belong, is one which stretches far back into antiquity. To-day it is the religion under various forms, of two hundred and seven millions of the people of India. Hindus are divided and marked off into manifold interior diversities of worship belonging to differant ages and different grades of society, and the rites vary with the places at which they are practised. and the incarnations to which they are addressed. Like nearly all the older religions of the world, it has a set of forms for the common people, and a different inner meaning for the educated and initiated. The inner meaning is that all the great elemental forces of Nature are manifestations of the all-pervading divine energy. and that man himself is but a vessel which contains the divine particle giving thought and utterance to visible humanity. The Hindu doctrine is that God pervades all Nature, so that in worshipping Nature, you actually worship the Divine

Spirit in every atom of matter. Manu, the well-known founder of Hindu socio-religious institutes, speaks of ten injunctions as follows :—

" Resolution, patience, self-restraint, honesty, purity, restraint of the organs, devotion, knowledge, truthfulness and absence of anger are the ten constituents of *Dharma*. Brahmans, who study these ten, and having gone over them, act up to them, attain a supreme course of existence." Manusanhita, Chap. VI, verses 92, 93.)

Similarly, Manu speaks of ten prohibitions as follows :—

" Covetousness, malice and scepticism constitute the threefold evil act of the mind. Abuse, untruth, back-biting and frivolous irrelevant talk are the fourfold evil act done by the voice. Stealing, killing without the sanction of law, and adultery with another's wife are called the, threefold evil act of the body." (Manusanhita, Chap. XII, verses 5, 6 and 7.)

13. The ultimate good revealed through the Hindu religion is the freedom of the soul from the body to anything that has sensation, and its return through a succession of existences to the infinite Spirit whence it came. The books of Hinduism are full of moral precepts and virtuous maxims enjoining piety, austerity and the abnegation of self for the conduct of life in this world. A good Hindu is a good man. He claims that a pure Hinduism is the spirit of true religion, Sanatana Dharma, a definition which proclaims its catholicity and universality. According to the Vedas and Shastras there are seventy-two divisions and innumerable sub-divisions of Sanatana Dharma; and these sub-divisions are again divided in nnmerous branches which I will not trouble you to name, but will put them in an Appendix to this address for future reference.

14 I must now draw these remarks to a close. Delegates and representatives of the various religions of the world who have come from far and near to attend this great Congress, I extend to you a most cordial welcome, and our heartiest thanks are due to all who have come prepared to read papers on their own distinctive faiths, and otherwise to take part in the proceedings of the Session. I trust you will return to your homes feeling that you have had a real pleasure in being here, and that you will carry away with you the reward of having contributed in no small degree

to a better understanding of one another and of the several faiths to which we belong.

Gentlemen, in conclusion, I have to thank you for the patience with which you have listened to me. I have great hopes as to the results which will follow this Parliament of Religions. The grand ultimate test of the value of any religion is its ability so to mould its worshippers as to turn out good men of high spiritual character. A religion that fails to do this is of little use to humanity. Amid all our diverse faiths there is only one end in view and everything is moving on, independent of our wills, to—

> " One God. one law, one element,
> And one far-off Divine event,
> To which the whole creation moves."

In the end there will only be one religion which will express itself in Love to God, in Love to our Brothor Man. May this Parliament be the means of helping on that glorious day in the history of the world.